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20th-Century Medicine Books

Pregnancy and Childbirth Medical Books

Great advances were made in birth control with the improvement of intrauterine devices in the 1950s and the development of the birth control pill in 1960 by the American biologist Gregory Pincus. By the 1990s long-lasting hormonal implants and contraceptive injections such as Depo-Provera were developed. These options gave women more control in deciding whether to become pregnant. Voluntary sterilization, involving vasectomies in men and tubal sterilization in women, emerged as a popular way of permanent birth control. Unwanted pregnancies, however, remained a serious problem in the late 1990s. Researchers still sought more convenient and safer methods of birth control, including a male birth control pill.

By 1975 physicians were able to diagnose some congenital or inherited diseases before childbirth. Doctors take samples of placental cells or of the amniotic fluid around the fetus to determine whether hereditary blood diseases, Down syndrome, defects of the spine, or other congenital diseases are present. Even the sex of a fetus may be known in advance.

In addition to advances in early diagnosis, progress occurred in identifying the causes of some birth defects. Excess alcohol consumption during pregnancy was linked to fetal alcohol syndrome, and inadequate intake of the vitamin folic acid was linked to spina bifida and other neural tube defects.

Advances in treating infertility, which prevents couples from having children, began with the world's first so-called test-tube baby born in the 1980s through in vitro fertilization. Other forms of assisted reproduction soon became available. Researchers in 1997 cloned a lamb from cells taken from an adult ewe. It led to speculation that human cloning could become another option in human reproduction.